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Hospice

A Play in One Act

Cast

ALICE ANDERSON, a black woman, age 47

JENNY ANDERSON, her daughter, age 30

(The time is early morning. The set is a small house with upstairs and downstairs. The downstairs area is the main playing space, but the upstairs must be large enough to accommodate the bed, dresser with mirror, etc. This is ALICE's bedroom. JENNY sleeps downstairs, but her bed is not visible. The house is small and crowded with the accumulated paraphernalia of a lifetime. The walls are full of framed photos of dead family. There is a couch with a comforter or soft, warm coverlet of some sort thrown across the back. A coffee table in front is piled high with newspapers, books, mail, papers and medicine bottles. On the table also is a vase holding a dozen beautiful, long-stemmed red roses. In the corner of the room is a small table piled almost as high as the coffee table with papers of various kinds. Somewhere in the middle is a typewriter. This is the area where JENNY writes. Tucked next to the table is a small suitcase. There is also a record player surrounded by record albums in and out of their covers. It is not an expensive, modern stereo, but has surprisingly good quality sound for its age and size. There are several brimming bookcases, some potted plants in various states of well-being, etc. The feeling of the room is cluttered, but not claustrophobic.)

An elaborately carved wooden cane sits against the record player. It is morning. Early. The light is that thin early morning kind that lets you know the sun is still undecided. As the lights come up, we hear the sound of a typewriter clicking away. The daughter, JENNY, is hunched over her work. There is a floor lamp burning over her, creating a small pool of light in the eerie morning gloom. JENNY is thirty years old and very pregnant. She is frowning at the page which is still dangling from her typewriter. Re-reading over what she has just typed, she rips the page out and adds it to the small pile of crumpled balls at her feet. She shifts uncomfortably in her straight-back chair, and placing both hands behind her, arches her back, massaging the kinks out of her spine. She has been up for awhile. She shakes her head, and resumes her typing. Upstairs, her mother stirs and turns over in her bed restlessly with a soft moan. Hearing the noise, JENNY stops typing suddenly, listening. There is no immediate movement upstairs. She leans back to her work and is suddenly irritated by the fact that her very pregnant belly keeps her from getting as close to the table as she wants to. It is awkward. She tries turning sideways which means she has to type across her stomach. This is even more awkward. She tries several more approaches, but nothing works. During this process, the mother, ALICE, sits up slowly. She is in obvious pain. The upstairs light is always blue and dim. The impression is of silhouette and shadow. ALICE almost doubles over when she sits up, but straightens slowly and with great effort. She is thin and very frail. She is dying of cancer and her head is bald or very lightly fuzzed over with hair from chemotherapy. Her head should not be covered during the course of the play. Slowly and painfully her back straightens, her shoulders are square, and she finds the strength

to push the covers off and slowly swing her legs over the side of the bed. She is wearing a long cotton nightgown with sleeves. The effort of sitting up has been very great. She remains motionless, seated on the edge of the bed.)

JENNY (loudly): Well, damn! (She has spoken more loudly than she meant to and looks guiltily upstairs. ALICE's head looks up in the direction of the curse. When there is no follow-up sound, she droops again. JENNY rises and goes to the bottom of the stairs, listening. No sound from ALICE. JENNY seems obviously relieved and crosses back to sit down at her typewriter. She pours herself a cup of tea from the pot near her. She sips the tea slowly, reading over the page that is in the typewriter and absentmindedly stroking her belly. Suddenly, JENNY drops the pages and begins to pant rapidly. She is having a contraction. When it ends, she checks her watch and crosses slowly to the phone. She is excited, but trying to contain it. She dials quietly.) Alexis? I'm sorry! I know it's early, but I think it's happening! Yes! Since early this morning . . . No. I'm okay . . . Yes . . . Alright . . . I'll call you later.

(Upstairs, ALICE stands quietly and walks to the dresser. It is an old-fashioned wardrobe with a full-length mirror on the door. She slowly takes off her nightgown and looks at herself naked in the mirror. We see her in shadow, but it is clear that she is gazing at her body. She folds the nightgown and lays it on the bed. Downstairs, JENNY finishes her tea and resumes typing. ALICE dresses slowly. Underwear, long socks, long skirt, sweater buttoned over it all. She slips on her shoes and makes her slow, painful, laborious way down the stairs. Holding the bannister tightly, she manages it, but the effort to do it with such a straight back and measured gait is immense. JENNY is typing loudly, continuously, and is thoroughly absorbed in her work. She does not look up when ALICE reaches the bottom of the stairs and stops to catch her breath. After a moment, ALICE turns to look at JENNY. JENNY, typing furiously, is oblivious. ALICE walks slowly over to the record player and puts the needle down on the record already on the turntable. It is not the first cut on the album, but she goes right to the spot as if she'd done it a thousand times before. With sudden and unexpected richness, the strains of Leontyne Price singing Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" fill the room. It is "Un Bel Di." JENNY jumps, startled out of her reverie by the blast of music. ALICE moves slowly but with determination over to the couch and sits down slowly, eyes closed, listening to the music and trying not to give in to the pain.)

JENNY: God! You scared me! (She moves to turn down the record. No word from ALICE.) I thought I heard you get up. (JENNY moves to her desk and carefully takes her work out of the typewriter and puts it face down on her desk. No response from ALICE. Her eyes are closed. She is listening intently.) Are you okay? (ALICE looks at her, and JENNY looks a little guilty at what could be a loaded question.)

ALICE (sarcastic): Never been better. What were you cussing about?

JENNY: What? Oh. I'm sorry. I got stuck in the middle of something. You know . . .

ALICE: I didn't mean to startle you. I wasn't ready to wake up yet.

JENNY: Did you sleep much?

ALICE: No.

JENNY: Me neither. I try to lie on my back, but after awhile, she gets so heavy, I feel like I'm smothering.

ALICE: Well, it won't be long now, as they say.

JENNY: As they say. You want some tea? I just made it a few minutes ago. (ALICE nods but doesn't answer. She is listening. Eyes closed. JENNY goes for the tea.)

ALICE: Turn it up a little, will you? (JENNY stops at the record player and turns it up. The rest of "Un Bel Di" is sung by Leontyne Price as JENNY gets the tea and ALICE leans back, eyes closed, while she listens. JENNY brings the tea, standing quietly until the song finishes and then turns off the record. ALICE sits motionless for a few moments as if in a trance, then comes back to reality and sits fully erect, eyes open, back in touch with the world around her. JENNY hands ALICE her tea and goes back to her work.) Deadline?

JENNY: Not really. I told them I wasn't going home to work. I was going home to have a baby! (Laughs at her own determination.) I knew I could get away with it. They've never had a black film critic before. (Evasively.) I'm working on a couple of things, but it's hard when the only deadlines are self-imposed.

ALICE: I've always found those to be the hardest ones to miss. Well, I hope you're not blaming this lack of discipline on me. This is your choice, you know. Just keep that in mind.

JENNY: Don't worry. I accept full responsibility.

ALICE: You should.

JENNY: I have.

ALICE (a beat): I envy your confidence, but I wish it didn't make you start typing quite so early in the morning.

JENNY (very controlled): I think you completed your bad night by getting up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. I said I'm sorry I woke you. I'll say it again, only because I really mean it. I'm sorry.

ALICE: Me too.

(JENNY rises, stretches, and sits down Indian style on the floor. She has the soles of her feet together and is bouncing her knees toward the floor, pushing them down closer with every bounce. She continues as she speaks, trying to make "neutral conversation.")

JENNY: Daddy laughed when I first started doing movie reviews. He thought it was the perfect job for me. We used to go to the movies all the time. It gave us something neutral to talk about. No matter how many demonstrators the police locked up, Katherine Hepburn was going to marry Cary Grant; Norma Shearer was going to smile that sweet, sad smile; and Natalie Wood was gonna do Juliet all over Spanish Harlem.

ALICE (putting her cup down with a smash, irritated by JENNY's chatter and her bouncing knees): Do you have to talk about that now? (JENNY stops abruptly and sits perfectly still. ALICE winces, recovers quickly, and looks fully into JENNY's face.)

JENNY (softly): You ought to take something.

ALICE: Like what?

JENNY: Like something for the pain. There's no shame in that.

ALICE: Shame? (She laughs and shakes her head.) You've been watching too many of those Hollywood movies. No real sick person gives a damn about shame.

JENNY (reaching for the medicine): Then take something. (ALICE's hand on hers stops her abruptly and with finality.)

ALICE: I'm not myself when I take something.

JENNY: Then, by all means, take two.

ALICE: Touche, Sister. Touche! (JENNY *extends a pill and pours a small glass of water from a pitcher on the table. ALICE relents and swallows the pill and several more. She leans back again, waiting for the medication to take effect. JENNY lays down on her back near the couch and takes a long, deep Lamaze cleansing breath. She sucks in as much air as she can, holds it, then lets it out with an extended "whoosh!" ALICE opens her eyes and watches her. JENNY places her hands very lightly on either side of her stomach and breathes in and out, using the Lamaze method.*) What is that supposed to do?

(JENNY *holds up a finger to indicate that she has to complete the cycle before breaking the breathing to respond. She accelerates her breathing until she is panting rapidly and loudly. She stops after a minute, takes another deep cleansing breath, and lets it out.*)

JENNY: I've tried to explain all of this to you before. Why do you always wait until I'm in the middle of it to decide you want to listen?

ALICE: I'm easily distracted.

JENNY: It's supposed to minimize the pain during labor. Redirect your energy or something.

ALICE: It's not your energy you're going to be concerned about. Trust me.

JENNY: No horror stories please! I can't stand it when people tell a pregnant woman horror stories, especially when I'm the pregnant woman!

ALICE: You've already heard all the horror stories I know. You've probably written them all down, too.

JENNY: You're very closemouthed with your stories, now that you mention it. Horror or otherwise.

ALICE: But the few gems I've let slip have not escaped your attention. You've probably made a few notes, just in case.

JENNY: I probably have. Would you mind?

ALICE: I'm not sure. I guess not. It's not like I'm going to use them for anything. You're not, are you?

JENNY: Going to write about you? (ALICE *waits but does not answer.*) Probably.

ALICE (*laughs*): God! That isn't really fair, is it? Why write about me now? Another dreary tale of a cancer-ridden mother attended by her long lost, but dutiful, daughter. The last days of Acid Alice. (*Laughs bitterly.*) Not the stuff best sellers are made of, Sister. Not this year. Not this color.

JENNY: I'll risk it.

ALICE: Don't fool yourself. You're not risking anything. It would probably be great therapy at the very least. (*A beat.*) I'm sorry. I'll be better in a minute. Soon as this pill decides which pain to concentrate on first. Is there any more of that sweet wine we had around here the other day?

JENNY: I stuck it away someplace.

ALICE: What are you writing about that makes you start cussin' so early in the morning?

JENNY (*bedding; sheepishly*): I'm trying to create a portrait of "the new woman."

ALICE: Is there such a creature?

JENNY (*laughingly*): That's the problem. I've read endless magazine articles about her. I've gone to conferences dedicated to her and read novels supposedly written by her about herself. But . . .

ALICE: Different costumes, Sister, same character.

JENNY: Voila!

ALICE: I can't stand the taste of sweet wine. I've never liked it, but it's the only kind that doesn't upset my stomach. Probably just another part of the penance. It's true, you know.

JENNY: What's true?

ALICE: About your not risking anything. It's true. I don't want you to fool yourself about that.

JENNY: I'll try not to. (JENNY hands ALICE her wine and drinks some herself.) Cheers! Getting pretty decadent around here, aren't we? It's not even nine o'clock in the morning, and we're already drinking wine.

ALICE (*draining her glass*): I'm your mother. It's okay.

JENNY (*suddenly concerned*): Is this okay for you to be drinking that with your medicine? (*She looks on the bottle label for possible warning label.*)

ALICE: Probably not. But what's the worst that can happen? It might kill me.

JENNY: I don't want all of our conversations to be about dying!

ALICE (*very quietly*): Then get out.

(JENNY looks stunned as if ALICE had struck her.)

JENNY (*looking for a neutral subject*): What happened to all of those old Billie Holiday records you used to have?

ALICE (*still calm and quiet*): I don't think you should be here, Jenny. I don't want you here.

JENNY: Your timing is lousy, mother. I'm having a baby any minute now, remember?

ALICE: I'm not asking you to go to the moon, Sister. It is my understanding that Prince Charming resides just across town.

JENNY: That's not open for discussion! And what difference does it make? I had a man and I don't have him anymore.

ALICE: I'm old-fashioned. I believe that if you ever have them, you always have them.

JENNY (*wearily*): We're not all as lucky as you are.

ALICE: Alright, Sister. Let's get the ground rules straight. This is my house. It was left to me, not to you, by my mother, not yours! I own it. Lock, stock and mothballs, and I came a very long way to get here in time enough to die in it.

JENNY: I wouldn't have moved in here if I had known you would be coming. It never occurred to me. It's not like you have a history of dropping in.

ALICE: It's not like I have a history at all as far as you're concerned, so why not just go wherever it was you would have gone if it had occurred to you that I might drop in.

JENNY: I want to stay.

ALICE: No, you don't. You think you ought to stay. Nobody wants to bring a new baby home to a death house!

JENNY: This is not a death house! I'm here, and I'm very much alive!

ALICE: I'm looking for a hospice, Sister. A place to die in peace, not in pieces. (*A beat. Wearily.*) It's just that I get so tired . . .

JENNY (*very gently*): I want to help you.

ALICE (*angered at her own vulnerability*): Why are you alone?

JENNY: Because I choose to be.

ALICE: Nobody chooses to be alone. You might choose your sanity, or your freedom, or some other wild thing that results in your being alone, but that's the fallout. The unavoidable consequences. Not the choice.

JENNY: Why can't you let me help you?

ALICE: You're not here to help. You're here to hide.

JENNY: I haven't got any reason to hide. I'm not ashamed of anything.

ALICE: Well, that's something we have in common. Shamelessness.

JENNY: I want to make the best of it.

ALICE: The best of *this*?

JENNY: The best of the time we have together.

ALICE: That's not one of my strong points, making the best of it.

JENNY: It's my specialty . . .

ALICE: You want to make a fairy tale out of it! You want me to tell you the secret of life and give you my motherly blessing. You want me to make up for twenty years of silence in two weeks. You want the two of us to play mother and daughter.

JENNY (*hurt and angry*): We *are* mother and daughter! (*Frustrated and confused.*) This is crazy! This doesn't make any sense!

ALICE: Is it supposed to make sense?

JENNY: Isn't it? I'm not a child anymore! We are two grown women!

ALICE: My mother used to tell me that once she was sure I understood what being grown meant, she'd never have to worry about me again.

JENNY: Is that why you came here? To see if I was grown?

ALICE: No. To see if I was. (*A beat.*) I'm dying, Sister. I'm only forty-seven years old, and I'm dying. I don't have the energy to figure out what you need to know and tell it to you.

JENNY: What are you talking about?

ALICE: You've been sitting around with that hopeful look on your face ever since I got here. You want too much, Sister.

JENNY: I don't want anything from you! You're my mother, and I'm your daughter. Isn't that enough?

ALICE: Yes, you are my daughter. (*A beat. The medication and the wine make her a little drowsy.*) My very own baby daughter. (*A beat.*) I'd like to have been better at this, Sister. But I just don't have any energy left for it now. I need all my energy for myself. I have to pay very close attention to what's happening up here. (*Taps her temple lightly.*)

JENNY: I understand . . .

ALICE (*sarcastic*): Do you?

JENNY: I think I do. (*She resumes her Lamaze exercises quietly.*)

ALICE: Well, then, you don't need any advice from me. You've got everything under control here, Sister. You've got it all organized. You've found a way to redirect your energies and feel no pain. You've even taken the guessing out of boys and girls.

JENNY: It's safer, that's all. I just wanted to be careful since she's my first one.

ALICE: It's a violation.

JENNY: No, mother. Nothing so dramatic as that. It's a simple test that lets you know in advance if your baby is going to have two heads and by the way reveals the gender. It just gives Alexis a little more information to work with. There's a certain amount of risk in having a baby when you're as old as I am.

ALICE: I can't tell you anything about that. You and my eighteenth birthday arrived neck and neck. Is thirty late? Women used to have babies from nine to ninety.

JENNY: It's late for a first one. What are you talking about anyway? (*Laughs.*) You sound like a pioneer woman. "Nine to ninety."

ALICE: It's all different now. Your doctor doesn't even sound like a doctor.

JENNY: Alexis?

ALICE: How can you call your doctor Alexis?

JENNY: That's her name, mother. Don't act so shocked. You're not so old that ought to shock you.

ALICE: No, I guess not. (*A beat.*) I don't even know if the doctor who delivered you had a first name. Dr. Stewart. I never heard anybody call him anything else. Young Dr. Stewart. That was it.

JENNY: "Young Dr. Stewart" . . . sounds like a soap opera doctor.

ALICE: He only delivered babies at the Catholic hospital. The whole time I was in labor with you I had to look at all these bleeding crucifixes. Nails in the palms, a sword in the side, and a great big bleeding valentine right in the middle of his chest.

JENNY: Want some more wine?

ALICE: No. Yes, I guess so. I'm on to you, Sister. You think I'll get high and reveal those secrets you think I'm guarding so closely.

JENNY: No, I don't. I'm hoping you'll get a little high and remember where you put those Billie Holiday records.

ALICE (*irritated*): They're down there with the rest of the records, or they should be. Where else would I put them? Upstairs in my room? It's been awhile since I was in any condition to be playing Billie Holiday in my bedroom!

(*JENNY rummages through the records looking for Billie Holiday.*)

JENNY: I told someone once that the music of Billie Holiday ran through my early life like a leitmotiv.

ALICE: What did he say?

JENNY: Why do you assume I was talking to a man?

ALICE: It's a seduction line, Sister. I'm not that sick. What did he say?

JENNY: He said, "What's a leitmotiv?"

(*They both laugh.*)

ALICE: You know what your father said when you were born?

JENNY: What?

ALICE: I thought he might be disappointed because you weren't a boy, so I said I'd heard that sometimes kings divorce their wives if the firstborn is female. And he laughed and shook his head. "Not in my tribe," he said. "Not in my tribe."

JENNY (*delighted*): He never told me that!

ALICE: It's not a man's story. That's a story women tell each other. (*A beat.*) You see how you're looking at me? You're doing it again! I shouldn't have told you anything! It's only going to make you think you were right about those secrets. Forget it, Sister! It's only the way this medicine (*holding up the wine*) and this medicine (*taps medication bottle*) make my mind wander. There are no secrets. (*A beat.*) Well, maybe one.

JENNY: And what's that?

ALICE: That there are no secrets! (*A beat. ALICE is exhausted. She closes her eyes.*) How was it . . . for your grandmother?

JENNY: I think the memory loss was the worst part, for her and for me. She thought the nurse's aides were her daughters. Once when I went to visit, two of them were helping her pick out the earrings she was going to wear that day. She had about five pairs spread out on the sheet, and they were talking as seriously as if she had been getting ready for a night at the opera. (*A beat.*) Sometimes she would make me sit right in front of her and hold my face in her hands and look real hard. (*A beat.*) Sometimes she would remember that I was her granddaughter. Sometimes she could remember my name, but all of that went after awhile.

ALICE: What did they decide?

JENNY: Decide about what?

ALICE: The earrings.

JENNY: A pair of carved gold hoops with ram's heads. They were so heavy they pulled her earlobes down long. Stretched them out like a Watusi woman. She laughed when they held up a mirror so she could see herself. "There now," she said. "That's better."

ALICE: I gave her those.

JENNY: I wondered what she was doing with earrings like that.

ALICE: She used to tell me that the only women who wore big gold hoops in their ears were gypsies or prostitutes.

JENNY: She kept tossing her head so they would bump against her neck. They were very beautiful.

ALICE: When I sent them, I wrote and told her she was too prim ever to be mistaken for a gypsy and too old to be mistaken for a prostitute, so I thought it was safe for her to wear them. She wrote me back and said she was still my mother, and some things didn't change.

JENNY: God! I wish I knew what those things were!

ALICE (*sarcastic, but gently*): Oh, you know, Sister. The right way and the wrong way of doing things. What makes a "lady" and what does not.

JENNY (*finds the record*): Well, here's the only Lady that matters . . . in full gardenia!

ALICE: Don't play that now!

JENNY: Why not? (*ALICE does not respond. A beat.*) When she died, the paper said it was a drug overdose, and you were furious. You told me it wasn't the drugs that killed her. She died because she had to feel everything. Every time. You said nobody could live that way. Not for long.

ALICE: I was wrong, Sister. It's the only way you can tell you're still alive. (*A beat.*) Your father never liked Billie Holiday.

JENNY: I know. He said she made him feel lonesome.

ALICE: He wasn't the only one. You know she had a song that they made them stop playing on the radio because every time they did, the suicide rate in the city would go through the ceiling.

JENNY: Which one was that?

ALICE: "Gloomy Monday." Is it on there?

JENNY (*checks the label*): Yep.

ALICE: Well, don't play it! Lord knows we don't need any additional depression around here.

JENNY: What do you want to hear?

ALICE: How about a poem or two?

JENNY (*startled, covering*): I'm a journalist. You're the poet, remember?

ALICE: There's no journalist in the world who gets up at six in the morning to work. Journalists work late at night. Poets work at dawn. Don't fool yourself.

JENNY: That's the second time you've said that this morning.

ALICE: If I say it three times, believe me. That probably means it's good advice.

JENNY (*hesitantly*): Well, I have been working on something new.

ALICE (*raising eyebrow*): You're writing poems now?

JENNY (*nervously, fingering the pages*): Well . . . sometime . . . I hardly ever show them to anybody though. They can't help comparing mine to yours. (*She laughs ruefully.*) You're a hard act to follow.

ALICE: Then don't try it. And on second thought, don't read anything to me either.

If I'm a tough act, I'm probably an impossible audience. Where's Butterfly?

JENNY (*disappointed*): Again?

ALICE: Indulge me. If you're going to stay and keep watch at my death bed, the least you can do is indulge me.

JENNY: I should have told that kid Puccini ran through my life like a leitmotiv.

ALICE: No. That would only have added insult to injury.

JENNY: I used to be so embarrassed when you played this stuff.

ALICE: You have no shame about being the unwed mother of a fatherless child, and you were embarrassed at lovely Leontyne singing "Un Bel Di?"

JENNY: She has a father. Besides, you have to admit that Puccini was not exactly the dominant musical influence in our neighborhood. Our driveway was the only place where you had to be careful or you might get hit by a blast of "La Boheme" in the middle of a serious handball game. Everybody else was playing The Supremes! (*Laughing at the memory.*) I remember one day I was trying to get you to at least turn it down a little, and you made me listen to "Un Bel Di" all the way through. You told me to see if I could hear the same thing in it that made me love Smokey Robinson. You said forget about Italians and operas and just try to hear the passion.

ALICE: You looked at me like I was crazy, but you closed your eyes and listened. (*A beat.*) Ten years old . . . trying to hear the passion.

JENNY: I used your analogy a couple of weeks later when Dwan Johnson asked me what was playing at our house. I told him it was "Un Bel Di," and when he asked what it meant, I said, "one fine day." And he said, oh yeah? Just like the Chiffons!

ALICE (*laughs gingerly*): You know I hate the idea of taking these damn pills, but they do help.

JENNY (*a beat*): You know, when I got to college half the girls in my dorm had your books. It was a weird feeling. I had never seen them before, and they would come up to me and ask me about you. It was like some of them knew more about you than I did!

ALICE (*a beat*): I guess I should eat something.

JENNY: What would you like?

ALICE: There's some jello in there, I think. (*She shudders at the thought.*)

JENNY: How about some soup?

ALICE: I don't think so.

JENNY: It's just broth. I don't think it will upset your stomach.

ALICE: Maybe later. It's bad enough to be babbling like this without being nauseated too!

JENNY: There should be something in there that will appeal to you. Let me take a look. I'll put this on to entertain you while I'm gone.

ALICE: I don't want to be entertained. That's what I've been trying to tell you!

JENNY: Alright, alright. I stand corrected.

ALICE: Oh, hell. What's the difference? (JENNY sets the record on and exits to the kitchen. It is "In My Solitude." ALICE winces a little in pain now that she is alone, but she quickly straightens and takes several more pills rapidly.)

JENNY (calling from the kitchen): I've got some plain yogurt too. What do you think? (ALICE leans back listening, eyes closed. She reaches out to touch the beautiful roses. JENNY enters with a small tray. She has to balance it precariously on the pile of stuff already on the coffee table. She fusses over the food until the song ends.) If I thought taking heroin could make me sing like that, I'd be a junkie with no regrets.

ALICE: You can't sing like that without some regrets, Sister. Don't you know that yet? You better put some sugar in those roses.

JENNY: Sugar? Why?

ALICE: Flowers always live longer if you put some sugar in the water.

JENNY: I guess everything does better with a little sweetening.

ALICE: The woman who told me that was a fiend for roses. She was beautiful, and her boyfriends always sent her roses. Red only! Her apartment was full of them. The scent would choke you when you went to see her. She had so many roses she used to float their petals on her bath water.

JENNY: I tried that once. It sounds beautiful, but it feels like a tub full of hot, sticky rose petals.

ALICE: You know, this place looks very different.

JENNY: It needed a lot of work. Renovations, repairs. I did most of it myself. It took longer than I thought it would. I made a lot of mistakes. Do you like it?

ALICE: I'm not sure yet. (A beat.) I sure went the long way around to end up sleeping in the house I was born in.

JENNY (a beat): I can't believe you're really here.

ALICE: That makes two of us, Sister. (A beat.) The quiet in this house used to be so strong it was a part of the conversation. Mother and Daddy were so calm about everything. They never raised their voices. (A beat.) I used to wonder if I was their natural child. I used to study them, looking for clues. They were so damn certain! (ALICE closes her eyes and leans back. JENNY watches her and then suddenly has a contraction. She handles it calmly, blowing out for a few seconds Lamaze style. ALICE speaks without opening her eyes.)

ALICE: You're not going to start that again, are you?

JENNY (out of breath): No. I'm going to pack. (She begins putting things in the large suitcase near her desk. ALICE opens her eyes and watches.)

ALICE: What all are you taking to the hospital, Sister?

JENNY (laughing): Not much. This is the only bag I have.

ALICE: I've got a carpetbag. Very bohemian. I guarantee there'll be nothing like it on the ward.

JENNY: Sounds wonderful. Where is it?

ALICE: Look upstairs.

(JENNY goes upstairs and rummages around to find the carpetbag, still talking.)

JENNY: I wish I had a bed jacket to take with me. I love those scenes in the movies where the new mother is always propped up on lace pillows in a pink satin bed jacket. (As JENNY rummages and talks, ALICE rises stiffly and wanders

rather aimlessly around the room. She stops to touch a picture frame here, a piece of furniture, but all very absently. She is not looking for anything. She is simply moving around restlessly. She moves to JENNY's desk and sees the two pages JENNY was working on this morning. She picks up the pages slowly and reads a little. Upstairs, JENNY finds the carpetbag and opens it to look inside.) They don't hardly make bed jackets like that anymore. I guess they . . . (She seems to be surprised by what she sees and reaches in to withdraw a cheap wig. She realizes that ALICE may have worn it as a concession to vanity when her hair started to fall out. JENNY is embarrassed to have found it. ALICE is aware that JENNY has stopped in mid-sentence. She breaks off her reading and looks upstairs. JENNY puts the wig back in the closet and starts talking again nervously, coming downstairs.) I always like that scene in "The Women" where Joan Crawford and Norma Shearer are getting ready to have it out and the store lingerie model keeps sweeping through saying "Try our new one-piece foundation. Zips up the back and no bones."

ALICE (*watches JENNY with irritation as she crosses to sit down again, wincing slightly*): I don't care, you know?

JENNY: About what?

ALICE: About what you think. About your crude efforts to capture my madcap phase in your schoolgirl poetry. Hardly a fitting memorial. (*A beat.*) It just doesn't matter, Sister. Can't you see that?

JENNY (*stung and hurt*): What does matter to you?

ALICE: My own heartbeat. The way my blood feels rushing through my veins. The parts of my body that are going to start hurting again in a few minutes. All of that matters. (*ALICE winces, and JENNY moves toward her.*)

JENNY: Are you okay?

ALICE: Stop asking me that! I'm not anywhere in the vicinity of okay, and I'm not going to be for the rest of the time you know me. (*ALICE leans back and takes a pill wearily. JENNY has retreated and started transferring her things from her big bag to the carpetbag. She realizes there is still something in it. She withdraws a small packet of things: papers, photographs, etc., bound up with string.*)

JENNY (*cautiously, but curious*): What's this?

ALICE (*wearily*): What?

JENNY: All this "stuff"? (*JENNY hands the packet to ALICE who holds it delicately in her hands.*)

ALICE: Some old photographs. A poem or two. Your father's letters.

JENNY (*startled*): He wrote you?

ALICE: Yes.

JENNY (*surprised*): When?

ALICE: For years.

JENNY: He never showed me your letters!

ALICE: I didn't say that I wrote to him. I said he wrote to me.

JENNY: You never wrote back?

ALICE: No.

JENNY: Not once?

ALICE: Not once. If I had had anything left to say to your father, I wouldn't have been in Paris.

JENNY: How long did he write to you?

ALICE: I told you for years.

JENNY: But how many? How many years?

ALICE: Until he died.

JENNY: Where are the rest of them?

ALICE: I burned them.

JENNY: You burned them? God! Don't you ever think about anybody but yourself? You could have given them to me!

ALICE: He asked me to burn them! Besides, they were my letters. Nobody else's.

(JENNY, *knowing this is true, but still hurt by the secret, turns away.*)

JENNY: What did he say about me?

ALICE: He never wrote about you. When I left he told me he wanted to write to me. I told him he could, but not to expect answers to his letters and that if he ever referred to you in any way, I would never open another letter that he sent to me.

JENNY: And he believed you?

ALICE: That's a child's question, Sister. Children can never imagine that their parents could sustain exchanges of over five seconds without discussing them. (JENNY *turns away, and ALICE begins to talk almost to herself.*) He wrote about almost everything. Books and politics. Gossip about people we knew and what they were doing. What he was thinking; ideas.

JENNY: He used to talk to me like that, too. Sometimes I felt like listening to Daddy talking was as close as words could ever hope to get to being music. He could start off with Langston Hughes, move to Stokely Carmichael, swoop down long enough to touch on whoever I fancied myself to be in love with at the time and finish up with Duke Ellington without ever taking a breath.

ALICE: He wrote me when Malcolm was shot down. He must have sensed how hard it was to be in Paris then. When something like that happens, you want to be around your own. It seemed like we all heard the news at the same time. We ended up gathering at the cafe where we spent half our lives, crying in our Pemo and trying not to feel so black and helpless and far away from home. But then we looked up the street and here comes this young brother who we know works at the American Embassy. That's all we knew about him because he never hung around with us, but here he comes in his dark blue, pin-striped suit with a step ladder under his arm.

JENNY: A step ladder?

ALICE: He walked right up in front of the cafe, opened the thing up and cleared his throat. Speaking the most perfect, diplomatic corps French, he invited us to express ourselves on the death of "our shining black prince." Then he stepped about halfway up that ladder, left the flawless French behind, and told us in good old Southside Chicago English how his heart was broken by what he had heard happened in the Audobon Ballroom. When he got done, somebody else got up and talked about hearing Malcolm at the Temple in Detroit, way back when, and I told about another meeting where he brought us all to our feet. Everybody had a memory of the man. (*A beat.*) We must have been there a couple of hours. When everybody had had their say, the young brother from the Embassy thanked us, folded up his ladder, and went on up the street.

JENNY: What was his name?

ALICE: I don't remember. I don't think I ever knew, really. He killed himself . . .

JENNY (*distracting ALICE from death*): What about pictures?

ALICE (*bemused*): Just some ancient snaps of the ex-patriot colored poetess in her prime. (*She hands the photos to JENNY who looks through them eagerly.*)

JENNY: Look at that dress! You look wonderful! Where were you going?

ALICE: Who knows? We are always . . . (*She catches herself suddenly, suspicious of being so unguarded.*) When are you planning to have this baby anyway?

JENNY: Any minute now!

ALICE: I want you to make other arrangements for after she is born.

JENNY: What?

ALICE: I don't want you to bring her back here. I don't want to see her.

JENNY: Not at all?

ALICE: No. Not at all.

JENNY: She's your granddaughter!

ALICE: We've been all through this, Sister. Why don't you just go home?

JENNY: This is home!

ALICE: Why don't you go to where home was before this was home?

JENNY: Because I can't.

ALICE: There's a big difference between can't and won't.

JENNY: Yes. I know. (*Picking up the snapshots again, hoping to resume the conversation.*) Who were you playing here?

ALICE: Probably a cross between Josephine Baker and Anais Nin. I had a lover who loved my "leetle 'ead." He had a lot of money, and it amused him to keep a black American poet. Poetess! That was the phase when I started calling myself Simone and wrapping my head round and around with silver ribbons. (*A beat. She looks at the photo.*) They told me my hair was going to fall out when they started the chemotherapy. They explain everything to sick people, you know, so we won't be surprised when the awful things that are going to happen actually start happening. They explain everything as they take you into those little dark rooms and sit you down. Then they ask you if you've got any more questions, and since they've just described the horrors of hell to you, you probably don't want to hear any more, so you say no, thank you. Then they ease the needles into your arm so that the poison can drip into you for an hour or so, and that's it. Sometimes you feel okay. A little weak, but pretty good. You might even eat something, which is usually a mistake because then you start throwing up. And your hair starts falling out, and pretty soon they tell you it didn't work, and you've still got the cancer, and they're real sorry about . . . your . . . hair. (*A beat.*) He used to love to rub my head, this European fool. I told him that in the United States, black folks didn't tolerate white folks rubbing their heads because we knew they thought it gave them good luck and we needed all our good luck for our damn selves. He just laughed. He didn't know what I was talking about. "You have such a perfectly shaped leetle 'ead," he used to tell me. "Such a leetle 'ead."

JENNY: I shaved my head once.

ALICE: Bald?

JENNY: Completely.

ALICE: If there isn't a good story associated with that kind of madness, there is no excuse for it.

JENNY: It's not much of a story at all really. It was during a time when all the white girls at school were ironing their hair, morning, noon and night. You couldn't

walk into the laundry room without bumping into Mary Jo or Susie Q. in their drawers with their hair thrown over the ironing boards.

ALICE: Why didn't you tell them about Madame Walker and her straightening comb?

JENNY: They weren't interested. I think in some weird way they thought the ironing board thing was some kind of ethnic beauty secret.

ALICE: Ethnic, maybe. But not black. There aren't enough of us with hair long enough to throw across an ironing board.

JENNY: After a couple of months, things moved from fad to fetish. All anybody talked about was ironing hair. The best temperatures to use. The advantage of steam over no steam. Techniques to do it yourself and tips on doing it with a friend. It was silly, but it started to get on my nerves. One day at dinner, I told them all I thought hair—ironed or otherwise—was the most boring subject in the world and to prove it I was going upstairs and shave all of mine off. And I did.

ALICE: How did you like it?

JENNY: The look or the feeling?

ALICE: Both.

JENNY: It felt great. Cool and strange. Sensual. The look took some getting used to, though.

ALICE: My Frenchman would have loved you! "Such a lovely leetle 'ead!"

JENNY: I liked what it did to those girls though. It made them keep their distance. They were intimidated by whatever it was that made me do it.

ALICE: Ordinary people often mistake courage for insanity. It frightens them. (A beat.) What did your father say?

JENNY: He never saw it completely bald. It had grown in some before I went home. It was still too short to suit him though. He looked at me real hard and then he said, "I don't think you've got the face for it."

ALICE: Your father never was one for the avant garde.

JENNY (pulls some other papers from the packet): What are these?

ALICE: Poems, Sister. Those are the poems. (A beat.) You recognize a poem when you see one, don't you?

JENNY: Can I read them?

ALICE: I should have burned them, too.

JENNY: Why?

ALICE: Because some things are better left unsaid.

JENNY: Are they about Daddy?

ALICE: Yes.

JENNY: All of them?

ALICE: Yes, Sister. They are all about Daddy. (A beat.) I was so young when I met your father that he was not just the only man I'd ever slept with, he was the only man I'd ever fantasized about. He was very gentle with me. Very tender. He knew I was a very young girl. He had been a man out in the world longer than I had been alive!

JENNY: "A man out in the world . . ." Listen to how old-fashioned that sounds!

ALICE: Those were different times. Black folks were a little more prim in the fifties just like white folks. Besides, I was only seventeen. I graduated from high school on Wednesday and married your father in the sanctuary of Plymouth Church on Friday night.

JENNY: Daddy said you looked so young to him when he looked into your face to say his vows that he was afraid you had lied and he was marrying a child.

ALICE: When we first got married, I used to write two or three serious love poems everyday. I used to write them on little tiny pieces of paper and put them under his pillow. Whenever he reached under there and found one, I'd read it to him. One night, I told him I wanted to send one of them to a magazine and he ate it!

JENNY: He did what?

ALICE: He ate it. Rolled it up in a little ball, popped it in his mouth, chewed a couple of times, and swallowed it right down.

JENNY: Was it your only copy?

ALICE: That's hardly the point, Sister. He told me those poems were a gift from me to him. He said my words went all down inside him and made him stronger. So I said, that's all very fine, but why did you eat my poem? And he just laughed and said, so the white folks wouldn't get it.

JENNY: Is that when you stopped writing them?

ALICE: No. I wrote them for awhile after that. I just had to memorize them, too. I didn't stop writing them until you were born. Then I didn't have . . . time. (*A beat.*) You want to know what I learned in Paris? Almost twenty years abroad and you know what I learned, Sister? (*She does not give JENNY a chance to respond.*) I learned that my name is Alice and not Simone and that the Left Bank is not as far from the West Side of Detroit as I was hoping it would be.

JENNY: It was as far away as another planet to me.

ALICE (*a beat*): I just don't have the energy to figure out what you need to know and tell it to you, Sister. I don't have enough time, and I won't pretend that I do.

JENNY: You never would pretend. Even when it hurt to tell the truth.

ALICE: It hurt you. It hurt me to lie.

JENNY: To lie about *what*?

ALICE: There was a voice screaming inside my head, Sister. After awhile, the only thing that mattered was to make her stop shouting.

JENNY: Did she tell you to go to Paris?

ALICE: She told me to go!

JENNY: Did she tell you not to take me with you?

ALICE: She never considered you at all.

JENNY (*recoils from this statement, but is silent for a moment. She stares at ALICE*):

Is it such a crime? To want to know the things your mother knows?

ALICE: And what if I tell you that I don't know anything at all? What if I tell you that running around Europe playing the exotic . . . playing god knows what . . . What if I told you it didn't teach me a damn thing?

JENNY: I wouldn't believe you.

ALICE: Now you do sound like your father. Confront the man directly with an unassailable truth—a provable reality—and he would look calmly into your face and say, "I don't believe you."

JENNY: There's more than one reality.

ALICE: Multiple truths? No. Multiple fantasy, but only one truth.

JENNY: You're making this so hard on me.

ALICE: Join the Club. Membership is absolutely voluntary.

JENNY: Even now, you just can't let it go, can you?

ALICE: Let what go? You're talking movie-speak again. Hollywood alone has created the myth of a secret guilt that torments the dying. Forget it, Sister. I let it go. I let it all go. Your father . . . the poems . . .

JENNY: Well, that's nothing new, is it?

ALICE: That's what I've been trying to tell you.

JENNY: I just . . .

ALICE (*interrupting angrily*): . . . you just decided to leave your husband or your lover or your friend and move into your grandmother's house to have a baby, and you liked the whole idea so much you couldn't drag yourself away even when your long lost decaying mother arrived at the door? Give up, Sister! That sepia-tone photograph you've been carrying around in your head for twenty years hasn't got anything to do with me. I wasn't that way then, and I'm not that way now.

JENNY: You don't want to know anything about me at all. You've already drawn your own conclusions.

ALICE: I have drawn no conclusions. I have made no judgments. You are free to do whatever you please.

JENNY: At what price?

ALICE: We all have to pay for something.

JENNY: Why can't you just be my mother for once and not some world-weary, wisecracking, black caricature of a cynical ex-patriot?

ALICE: I am being your mother. This is what your mother is, Sister. A world-weary, wisecracking, black caricature of a cynical ex-patriot.

JENNY (*quietly*): That is not the answer.

ALICE: Don't try for answers, Sister. You don't even understand the questions.

JENNY: That's where you're wrong!

ALICE: Am I?

JENNY: Yes, you are. I understand all the questions. Every single one. (*A beat.*) Right after you left, Daddy sent me away to boarding school. He thought I needed . . . I don't know . . . stability, safety. There had been bombings, threats on his life. So he sent me off to Massachusetts where I'd be safe. I knew he was doing the best he could, so I didn't tell him how much I hated it. I thought that if he really loved me, he would know. Somehow, he would feel it and come and get me. (*A beat.*) But he never did. (*A beat.*) That's one of the questions, isn't it? How come people that love you can't read your mind?

ALICE: Why should they?

JENNY: So that they can love you better!

ALICE: There is no better or worse, Sister. You either do or you don't.

JENNY: You make choices.

ALICE (*outraged*): Choices? Okay, Sister. Take a look! My parting gift to you is a close-up look at the end result of all those choices you're talking about with such enthusiasm. Choices? Take a good, long look at me, and save your reaction to this terrible truth for the labor room. You can scream about the injustice of it all in there, and nobody will pay you the slightest bit of mind. All the ladies do it. They'll never know that your screaming is different. That yours isn't about the pain of your bones separating to let your daughter out. That yours is about the presence of injustice in the world! They'll never suspect a thing. And it doesn't really matter anyway. In spite of their feigned interest, nobody else really gives a damn if you do your birthing and your

living and your dying well, or if you shriek and holler and cling to the nurse's arm.

JENNY: You left me?

ALICE: I did not see my future as the dedicated wife of the charismatic leader, dabbling in a little poetry, being indulged at cultural conferences and urged to read that one about the beautiful brothers and sisters in Soweto, or Watts, or Montgomery, Alabama. I just couldn't be that. The world is bigger than that. The world inside my head is bigger than that. Even now . . . I used to watch your father at rallies and in church on Sunday morning, and he'd be so strong and beautiful, it was all I could do to sit still and look prim in my pew. But he was committed to "the movement." He didn't have time anymore to lay in bed with me and improvise. I'd been a wife since I was seventeen, and here I was almost thirty, with a ten-year-old daughter, trying to convince your father to let me publish some love poems! But he couldn't. Or he wouldn't. The kind of love he had to give me now didn't allow for that. And I couldn't do without it. So I left. Not much of a story is it?

JENNY: I could have gone with you. I was old enough.

ALICE: I can tell you the day, the hour, the minute you were conceived. (*A beat.*) I couldn't stand to look at you. (*Changes her tone.*) And I'm selfish! You said it yourself. What was I going to do in Paris with a ten-year-old child? Besides, you were always more your father's child than you ever were mine.

JENNY: I didn't have much choice, did I?

ALICE: Neither did I, Sister. Neither did I. I've spent my life trying to heal a hurt I'm not supposed to have. I got so tired of being trapped inside that tiny little black box. No air, Sister. I couldn't get any air. Everybody was mad at somebody, or about something. (*A beat.*) My mother spent her life catching the bus downtown to the Anis Fur Company. Sitting there in that hot little back room sewing purple silk linings in rich white ladies' sable coats. I went there with her once when I was little. There must have been thirty black women in a room smaller than this one. It was hot and dusty and close. I felt like I was smothering. (*A beat.*) No air, Sister. No goddamn air.

JENNY: Daddy never wanted that.

ALICE: No. He wanted exactly what I was looking for. A way out of that black box. It's just that I was prepared to admit defeat and let the white folks have this particular piece of ground since they wanted it so bad. But your father was different. He was not prepared to give an inch. He was always talking about survival, and I was always talking about love.

JENNY: You were happy once.

ALICE: But the moment passes, Sister.

JENNY: Does that mean it never happened?

ALICE: It means most of the time nobody's even listening.

JENNY: I was listening.

ALICE (*angry*): For what? So you could make up schoolgirl fairy tales about my exotic existence? So you could record my tragic demise for posterity? (*She picks up the poetry and waves it at JENNY.*) Read it to me, why don't you? No? Okay! I'll read it to you then. I used to be good at this. "Pretend it's Paris." (*Her voice is totally sarcastic.*) "For mother . . ."

JENNY: Don't! (*JENNY grabs the poem away and crumples it in her hand. ALICE smiles cruelly.*)

ALICE: You're not a poet, Sister. You're a runner. Don't you even understand that? There are people who are runners, Sister. Runners who spend their whole life in flight. Sometimes the speed may have a kind of flash to it—a certain style—but in the end, it's nothing but a hard, scared run, and you end up somewhere panting and hurting and babbling over your shoulder into the dark. (ALICE *turns her back to* JENNY. *She is spent.* JENNY *speaks slowly but with confidence. Something in her tone makes ALICE turn as she speaks.*)

JENNY: "you ration yourself out
like there was a war on.
In Paris, the soldiers threw
chocolate bars and silk stockings.
some people saved the sweets
and hid the stockings in a bureau drawer.
safe and sound.
not me. i was the one
in my stocking feet
with chocolate smeared
across my smile
dancin' and grinnin'
unsafe/unsound/undone.
there's more i can give
if there's more you can take.
the only thing
i wanna do
is make love
and drink champagne
in the middle of the day
and in the middle of the night
and sometimes in the morning
i am the one
in my stocking feet
with chocolate smeared
across my smile
dancin' and grinnin'
i am the one.
oh, yes, i am the one.
close your eyes.
take a deep breath.
pretend it's Paris.
pretend it's Paris.
pretend it's Paris. . .

(*They look at each other for a long moment.*)

ALICE (*quietly*): It's too late to be sorry, Sister, but I . . .

JENNY (*stops her*): Sometimes the love is enough. When it's all you've got. Sometimes just the possibility is enough. And we don't have to explain it. We just have to be here together and try. We only have to try! (*A beat.*) All I ever wanted to tell you was that I understood. I think I always understood.

(JENNY and ALICE look straight at each other in silence. JENNY moves to ALICE, but then stops and winces slightly. She puts her hands to her stomach lightly, breathing through her mouth.)

ALICE: What is it?

JENNY (*panting a little*): Contractions! I'd better call Alexis. (JENNY goes to the phone and dials quickly. ALICE slowly picks up the crumpled pages of the poem, smoothing them carefully as JENNY speaks.) Alexis? I think it's . . . Yes. Pretty strong . . . Okay. I'll be ready. (*She hangs up.*) She's going to come by and pick me up.

(*They look at each other. ALICE touches JENNY's cheek lightly.*)

ALICE: I think when I married your father so young, my mother was afraid she wouldn't have time to get all the women lessons in before I was gone.

JENNY: Did she?

ALICE: She told me what she knew. I guess that's the best anybody can do. (*Suddenly.*) Forgive me, Sister. I did what I could.

(*They embrace each other very gently. Alexis' car horn blows outside.*)

ALICE (*breaking the embrace and urging JENNY to the door*): Don't try to be brave now, Sister. Scream as loud as you want.

JENNY (*stops at the door and looks back at ALICE*): I love you, Mamma.

ALICE: And I was always some place loving you, Baby. I was always some place loving you. (JENNY exits. ALICE sits down slowly in the rocking chair. She looks down slowly at the poem in her hand and all the energy seems to leave her body. She drops the pages to the floor.) Don't fool yourself, Miss Alice. Just don't fool yourself.

(*Lights go down slowly. ALICE remains in a blue spot in the dark and then it also fades. BLACK.*)

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